

## THE CHOLA-CHINESE CONNECTION

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### The Tamil-Chinese Maritime and Trade Relationship

The maritime trade between India and the Southern Chinese ports goes back to second century BC as pointed out by Haraprasad Ray.<sup>1</sup> Wang Gungwu in his work *The Nanhai Trade*,<sup>2</sup> references the texts which describe early Chinese voyages to Huang-zhi (likely Kancipuram). Haraprasad Ray has brought together a collection of Chinese historical texts describing links between polities of India and China.<sup>3</sup> It was suggested that through their earlier links with Southeast Asia, the Tamil and other Indian merchants were to reach China. Tamil merchants were spread throughout Southeast Asia from at least the 3rd century, as could be noted from the inscriptions available there.<sup>4</sup> The existence of South Indian communities in the southern Chinese ports is recorded from at least the 6th century,<sup>5</sup> and large communities existed in Quang-zhou by the 8th century.

### The emergence of Cholas as major maritime power

The Cholas emerged as a major new player during the 10th century in Southern India, in the Asian maritime trade. Tansen Sen<sup>6</sup> suggests that "some credit for the emergence of a world market must go to the Chola (or Chola) kingdom in Southern India. The trading ports and mercantile guilds of the Chola kingdom, he suggests played a significant role in linking the markets of China to the rest of the world." He cites the following passage from a Chola ruler as the rationale for participating in an encouraging maritime trade.<sup>7</sup> Make the merchants of distant foreign countries who import elephants and good horses attach to your self by providing them with villages and decent dwellings in the city, by affording them daily audience, presents and allowing them profits. Then those articles will never go to your enemies". Sen notes the intimate relationship between the temples, merchant guilds, Brahman

communities and the Chola rulers, and how the Chola rulers frequently turned over conquered regions to Brahman communities for developmental purposes, and that these communities then involved the merchant guilds in temple construction.<sup>8</sup> This idea continued that of Meera Abraham,<sup>9</sup> drawing from K.A.N.Sastri, notes the intimate links among the Chola state, merchant guilds, and religious institutions was one of the vital elements of the Cola state synthesis of the eleventh century". Had it been so, breakage or disturbance of such "intimate link" could have been one of the reasons of sudden disappearance of the maritime power of the Cholas.

### The Maritime strategy of the Cholas mis-interrupted

Like Spencer,<sup>10</sup> the western scholars have downplayed the maritime role of Cholas in the context, though, they used to interpret differently. The following activities have to be viewed critically:

The control of the Cheras by attacking their Maritime Academy and the ship building had been to check their direct supply of ships to the Arabs. The conquest of southern Karnataka by the Chola ruler Rajendra in 1032 had been to secure and control the internal trade routes in Southern India for the Tamil merchant guilds. The attack on the Sri Vijaya had been due to the fact that the latter not only misrepresented themselves as the "representatives of the SEA region" but also claimed that the Cholas were their "subjects". The attacks on South East Asia ports polities in 1025 and again in the 1070s, as well as the occupation of Sri Lanka in 1080, were intended to expand the commercial interests of the polity's merchants and thereby of the polity itself. The Kadambas' trade with middle-eastern areas has also been significant.<sup>11</sup> Whether, the Kadambas had been offshoot of the Cholas or otherwise has to be studied separately, as they have many things common with the Cholas.



## **The Chola temple, Sculptures and Inscription**

Gustave Ecke, who in 1933 found the broken Hindu sculptural remains, invited Ananda Coomaraswamy to comment on them, together with two further pillars located in the Taoist Tianhou temple.<sup>12</sup> In 1950's a largest number of sculptures were revealed during the demolition of the city wall, for which they had been used as building material<sup>13</sup> implying that the Hindu temple was demolished. The Kaiyun temple was subjected to renovation in the Ming period (1368-1644) incorporating the Hindu architectural elements into the structure of the temple, thus proving the existence of the temple in 1281 as recorded and was still in existence up until the fifteenth or sixteenth century. Then, after demolition, its last remaining stones were pillaged for temple renovation and for use as masonry filler. Huge Clark<sup>14</sup> points out that the so called "wing wall" in the mid-fourteenth century might have been built with the stones from a temple that was knocked down to make way for construction of the wall. According to Wu Wenliang Report (1956) the site may have been located of the Donghuai (southeast water) gate, that much of this material was required. The southern suburb, located between the city wall and the Jin River, was the commercial centre of Song and Yuan Quanzhou, and the district where foreign as well as Chinese merchants resided. Access to the river ensured easy commercial traffic and escape route in times of danger. An early thirteenth century geographical source, the Fangyu Shenglan, states that "two types of foreigners - one has fair skin and the other dark (are) living in Quanzhou (in fan =Jen hsiang), the lane for foreigners".<sup>15</sup>

### **The possible reason for the disappearance of the Tamils from Quanzhou**

In fact, the isolated remains of Hindu temples found proof that they must have suffered heavy damage. Most notably a freestanding sculpture of Vishnu, over a meter in height, recovered in the Nanjiaochang area of Quanzhou in 1934 was presumably intended as a cult image in a Hindu shrine, but the sculpture appears unfinished, so it is unlikely

that it was ever installed for active worship, as noted by John Guy. But, the dimensions point to a fact that an attempt was made to convert the Vishnu image into Buddha, as the ornamental portions were evidently chiselled off, as otherwise, if the existing sculpture were subjected to carving ornaments, loin cloth with folding etc., it would be disproportionately reduce with its dimensions as could be imagined with the head portion. Therefore, attempt could have been made to convert the Vishnu image. Thus, there have been many occasions where Hindu reliefs have been appropriated for worship in other contexts notably in Taoist and Buddhist shrines. That the Quanzhou famous temples are built upon the remains of Hindu temple is pointed out by other scholars also.<sup>16</sup>

### **The Vaishnavite sculptures found**

The mention about one metre height Vishnu sculpture has already been made. Besides, the two pillars on the Kaiyuan temple are decorated with twenty-four roundels, seven of which are devoted to Vishnu, one to Siva as an ascetic and the remainder are purely decorative. The subjects are concerned with the exploits of Krishna: Narasimha with ten hands killing Hiranya Kasipu; Vishnu enthroned with Lakshmi and Bhudevi; Vishnu on Garuda (Garudasana); Vishnu in his man-lion aspect (Narasimha); Deliverance of the king of the elephants (Gajendramoksha); Infant Krishna felling the Arjuna trees; Krishna subduing the serpent Kaliya (Kaliadamana); Krishna stealing milkmaids cloths. These themes were widely represented in late Chola period temples of Tamilnadu, reflecting the rising tide of devotional Hinduism (bhakti), as noted by John Guy. But it could spread as "Bhakti" at faraway places proves that it has no external influence.

### **The Saivite Sculptures found**

That both Vaishnavite and Saivite sculptures found side by side shows that there was no divide as one would expect among the Tamil merchants settled in Quanzhou. The following depictions have been found: Siva as Bhairavra with four arms carrying trident, drum, noose and skull-cup. Durvasa cursing Indira, when his elephant trampled the garland of the Rishi (A Puranic episode connected with Pandyas).



Cow worshipping Shivalinga (A Periyapuram episode). Several reliefs depict the Hindu god Siva venerating the deity, and one relief (now lost) depicts Nataraja, Siva as Lord of the dance. The western scholars interpret that the "Nataraja" theme emerged in the early Chola period (tenth century) as a popular subject for devotional images in Southern India, particularly in Chidambaram becoming a major centre of Saivaite worship with its great temple being devoted to Shiva Nataraja. Ironically, this sculpture was reportedly missing or irrecoverably lost.

### **The Cholas and Chinese in Maritime activities**

The Chinese were not a maritime nation, as the Arabs (and the Indians before them) were during the Han and Tang dynasties, but they succeeded in their efforts to be one after 1127 A.D. (Southern Song Dynasty) when the capital was shifted to Hangzhou, which was exposed to attacks from the sea.<sup>17</sup> The possession of a huge naval force enabled the Chinese to maintain control over trade with a piratical fringe in the high seas in the Pacific Ocean adjoining China. Towards the end of the thirteenth century and the beginning of the fourteenth century the Chinese became known in Europe through the accounts of Marco Polo, and by early Ming period (late fourteenth to fifteenth century A.D.) China was a naval power capable of extending its sphere of activity from the Eastern sea routes to as far as the Indian Ocean shores of East Africa in the West. On the other hand, the Cholas had established naval fleet with their presence registered well in SEA, China and Middle East areas. Therefore, when the Chinese could develop immediately into maritime power in 12th to 15th centuries,<sup>18</sup> during the same period, the appearance and disappearance of the Cholas as maritime power is dramatic and intriguing.

The Chinese had evidently learnt the trade secrets from their experience with other nations during the earlier voyages, and was diverting the huge profits from their trade to earn more money by supplying the Persian and Arab countries the necessities of life produced from the countries of origin. On the contrary, the Cholas were adhering to trade and

maritime ethics and moral code. Private trade transplanted the official tributary trade which the Zheng He voyages helped to bring huge returns to the investors, and these rich and influential individuals had to safeguard their interests. During the maritime trade and business activities, the captain, sailors and the owners followed no principles as they were interested in earning money, thus resorting to all types of unethical practices.<sup>19</sup> The eventual ban on foreign travel and trade came as a blessing in disguise for them.<sup>20</sup> Thus, many times, the Arab, Chinese and others exploited Indians browbeating their ethics. The piracy followed played a crucial role in affecting the Chola's maritime activities. The captured ships and sailors with captains were used as slaves.

It is a myth that the Cholas had a fleets, conquered SEA countries, traded with China, etc.

1. This is just like the hypothesis of Spencer that the Cholas dominance of oceanic waters, conquering SEA countries, etc. is a myth, as it is only over emphasizing the temple inscriptions of Rajaraja and Rajendra Chola.

2. As there were no maritime activities and there is no question of leaving any material evidences whatsoever of the nature.

But, still the available material evidences could not negate the Cholas maritime activities, as such temple building activities, establishment of settlements etc., could not have been possible without ships, as they could not have flown directly from South India to be transplanted there like a fairy tale miracle or come from vacuum. Therefore, it is imperative on the part of historians to come out with historical truth instead of diverting or negating the historical facts.

### **Conclusion**

The archeological evidences of China and South India are compared in the maritime and cultural context. Based on the material evidences, it is argued that the ship-building technology might have spread from South India to SEA and China during the first century. It is quite natural that along with the Indian traders, sculptors and temple builders who went there, the ship-builders and repairers also must have gone there, as they were required perennially for such maritime activities.



Still, there could be more evidences in Chinese areas and archives and therefore, the India/Tamil researches should make field studies in those areas to find out the possibilities of discovering the missing links to establish the maritime past of the

Chola period, before they disappear completely, because of political, religious or other changes and exigencies. The Indian government can also use the diplomatic relationship to encourage such studies.

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